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Introduction

1 In the last section of Willa Cather's third novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), the heroine Thea Kronborg explains her struggle to distinguish good voices from cheap imitations and her desire to reach the right audience at New York's Metropolitan Opera house to her old friend from Moonstone, Colorado, Doctor Howard Archie. After fervently defending her hatred of "the cheap thing" and her vital love of "the good thing," she continues to elaborate on the beliefs that have driven her pursuit of music from Moonstone to Chicago, Dresden, and New York.

> "You see," [. . .] "voices are accidental things. You find plenty of good voices in common women, with common minds and common hearts. Look at that woman who sang *Ortrud* with me last week. She's new here and the people are wild about her. 'Such a beautiful volume of tone !' they say. I give you my word she's as stupid as an owl and as coarse as a pig, and anyone who knows anything about singing would see that in an instant. Yet she's quite as popular as Necker, who's a great artist. How can I get much satisfaction out of the enthusiasm of a house that likes her atrociously bad performance at the same time it pretends to like mine ? If they like her, then they ought to hiss me off the stage. We stand for things that are irreconcilable, absolutely." [. . .] "You see, Doctor Archie, what one really strives for in art is not the sort of thing you are likely to find when you drop in for a performance at the opera. What one strives for is so far away, so beautiful"—she lifted her shoulders with a long breath, folded her hands in her lap and sat looking at him with a resignation which made her face noble—"that there's nothing one can say about it, Dr. Archie." (505)

2 As she keeps urging Doctor Archie to "see" her point of view, Thea gestures towards the distance and lapses into silence, unable to reconcile her feelings about art with the

commercial reality of her life as a performer ; she can't contain her frustration that true artistry will not be heard properly (and thus recognized) by a "common" public eager for immediate gratification and novelty. Implicit in her outburst is anxiety about whether she will be able take the heterogeneous materials of her art from their natural, vernacular, and folk origins in the American West to the metropolis of New York, use them to communicate differently from other performers, and succeed in creating an art that integrates the regional foundations of her own training with classical operatic tradition for a modern, cosmopolitan public.

3 The effort to locate intimate sources of feeling about past experience and to calibrate the value of different kinds of art runs through Cather's fiction, but it is especially prominent in *The Song of the Lark*, a novel which "holds a significant transitional position in Cather's work," according to Ann Moseley (599). Moseley and other critics have noted how much the details of Cather's childhood in Nebraska, her discovery of her voice within herself, and her travels in the canyons of Colorado and Arizona informed scenes in the novel, and Cather's recently published letters confirm the extent to which she identified with the novel's heroine and the soprano who inspired her, the Swedish-Norwegian singer Olive Fremstad. Most characters in her novels were "composites" drawn from her experiences in Red Cloud, Lincoln, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York. "In these places her settings and themes came to her before she ever planned the novel," Moseley explains (550). Cather admitted in a letter to Elizabeth Sergeant that she felt Thea "stretching herself inside my skin" (December 7, 1915, in *Selected Letters* 212). Cather's sense that in this novel she simultaneously created, embodied, and concealed a "second self," a heroine at once "new" and a part of herself, at once worldly and rooted, suggests her especially strong investment in her heroine's personal development and public success. It also helps to explain the vehemence with which Thea speaks here in defense of her hard-won conception of her voice's artistic value. Cather surely wanted—and perhaps feared—to make the same argument for herself.

4 In this essay, I argue that *The Song of the Lark* links the problems of preserving the American West's diverse cultures and socially marginalized groups and of sustaining the value of live performance in the age of reproduction through its fragmentary narrative of music's affective power. Artists still thought music to be more immediate than writing, but at the time of *The Song of the Lark*'s composition, the emergence of sound recordings began to test the differences between these expressive mediums. Because they manipulated the audience's senses of time and intimacy, recordings reconfigured the social, spatial, and temporal networks in which art circulated and provided a model against which a novelist could measure her own construction of temporality. At the same time, as anthropologists collected texts and artifacts of the indigenous cultures of the American West, wax cylinder recordings became part of an emerging archive of sound that allowed them to focus their attention in the field on accuracy and interpretation, rather than memorization. *The Song of the Lark* tests these modes of reproduction and these contexts for replaying performances as it narrates its heroine's development as an artist. Although it proclaims a universal artistic ideal, its record of folk music and vernacular performances, its discontinuous structure, and its final endorsement of sound recordings also reveal competing aesthetic and cultural points of view.

5 By exploring the feelings and desires that music evokes in various listeners and then narrating the difficulty of capturing them in a fixed narrative form or archive, *The Song of the Lark* exemplifies the cultural and temporal instability of regional representation in the modernist period. As Stephanie Foote explains, regional literature written by women in the late 19th century tends to be "oriented toward the past ; it seems lyrical, remote," with the places represented seemingly "on the verge of disappearing" (304). Regional literature in our contemporary moment, by contrast, resists equating places with a single culture ; instead, such novels are "vital, polyvocal, and in all cases they are presented as the objects of competing histories and representations, competing versions of the 'real' of the region" (304), Foote proposes. Located in between these historical moments, Cather's fiction reveals aspects of both periods of regional writing : it displaces the vitality of the West's regional cultures into the recent past, but it also preserves the continuity and value of competing immigrant traditions in resistance to a trans-Atlantic cultural marketplace that seeks to re-classify them as ethnic spectacle. Cather's fiction thus alternates between fixed and more fluid conceptions of place-based identity. In her interrogation of what it means to be in place, anthropologist Kathleen Stewart writes of the difference between "region" as a static category and "regionality," an affective process of sensing local, vernacular culture that "has the character and texture of an edge." Stewart suggests that the "categories or representations" of a region "ignore the tactile compositionality of things" (277), sensory elements that could also include sounds of nature, folk songs, and classical music.[1] Foote's history of women's regional writing and Stewart's critical meditation on regional affect provide new ways of thinking about *The Song of the Lark* as an acoustic archive and as a novel organized around scenes where sounds resonate at the edges of places resistant to erasure or assimilation.

Moonstone's voices

6 In a letter to Elizabeth Sergeant from June 27, 1915, Cather describes the response to galleys of *The Song of the Lark* by "[t]he best and most musicianly musical critic I know" as hinging on her writerly success in conveying the affect produced by her protagonist's voice : "The critic, knowing nothing about the story, was able to tell from her early lessons, just what the characteristics I meant her voice to have in later life, and yet nowhere in the early lessons is her voice described or defined" (*Letters* 204). In other letters Cather emphasizes the importance of the quality of a live voice ; for example, in a letter to editor-in-chief of the *Omaha World-Herald* Harvey E. Newbranch explaining the joys of the small-town opera house, she insists, "Only a living human being, in some sort of rapport with us, speaking the lines, can make us forget who we are and where we are" (*World and the Parish* 956-7). In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather explores the ways that different musicians produce feeling in their listeners, emphasizing how the process of hearing is shaped by the listener's social position and cultural knowledge. Listening to music requires simultaneously recognizing cultural tradition and opening the possibility of transcending individual identity and cultural difference ; in the novel, Cather reveals how select listeners can "forget who [they] are" and respond fully to any kind of music. However, distance, time, and the commercial demands of the marketplace all threaten the intimacy of a single, transcendent act of listening. The novel's protagonist and narrator repeatedly assert the capacity of a voice

to carry the listening out of space and time, but the narrative itself keeps testing whether the vitality of expression can be preserved across cultural and spatial boundaries, or through the process of technological reproduction.

7 Cather often recorded such differences through dialogue and sound while resisting ethnic hierarchies and standard rankings of musical genres. Moseley and others have pointed out that *The Song of the Lark* is filled with music of various genres (hymns, folk songs, popular songs, sonatas, oratorios, symphonies, operettas, and operas) by a wide range of composers, thus offering proof of Cather's varied musical interests. In Lincoln she attended performances of "light opera" and reviewed popular performers. John Flannigan notes, "Even though she prized the chance in Chicago to hear music that had not yet been played to death, she did not disdain *romanzas* merely because they had become 'street music'" (284) ; she appreciated an old Italian man's rendition of operas on the accordion even as she applauded performances at the Metropolitan Opera house. Susan Mizruchi affirms, "Cather's fascination with opera singers was long-standing and culminated in the 1913 *McClure's* profile of three who rose to fame in America during the first decade of the twentieth century," including Fremstad (170-1). Writing about music was a means for her "to preserve and relive a deeply memorable event by describing the particular sounds that have anchored various sensory images in her memory," Flannigan asserts (283). And throughout the 1920s, Cather continued to attend live performances of all kinds : her 1929 letter to Newbranch mourns the days of the "old opera house," when traveling stock companies often arrived on the night train, stayed for a few days at the local hotel, and entered into the spirit of the show so thoroughly that the performance seemed to occur "in four dimensions" (*The World and the Parish* 956-7). She appreciated movies, or "screen dramas," as she called them, but believed they couldn't appeal to "deep feelings" in the same way.

8 Also relevant to Cather's representation of speech and music in the novel is anthropologist Franz Boas's exploration of the problem of perceiving phonetic variations. Both Cather and Boas were interested in the problems of negotiating cultural difference (including the difference between "high" and folk or "low" cultures), questioning or redefining universal principles, and testing the possibilities for creating a cohesive audience and a meaningful archive. In narratives and texts that display a common "preservationist ethos," Cather and Boas recorded live performances of music considered in danger of being lost through modernization and aimed to locate sources of prejudice or misperception. While Cather would realize more fully the novel's ability to record the speech and stories of immigrants to the American West in the novels that followed *The Song of the Lark*, her imagination of the process of cultivating, preserving, and transmitting Thea's voice here reveals her early and sustained commitment to document and evaluate verbal artistry across the cultures and temporalities of modernity.[2] In contrast to the transcendent single performance that Thea imagines and finally achieves, the temporal and spatial gaps that fill Cather's novel mark shifts in perspective and introduce alternate models of artistic production and reception. In the spaces between the novel's parts, Cather adjusts the time frame or viewpoint ; these reorientations in turn transform the reader's perception of speech and music, thus making them sound different than they had before. The result is a novel that tests acts of perception and culturally specific practices of aesthetic judgment over time.

9 The early parts of *The Song of the Lark* incorporate European voices and melodies and popular Mexican songs and folk music ; the sounds of the city (especially Chicago) ; and sounds of nature (wind, wrens, woodpeckers, cicadas) that its characters would commonly hear but were not commonly recorded in fiction. In the sections of the novel set in Moonstone, Cather shows how Thea sought out the town's "truly musical people" in "Mexican Town," such as Famos Serrenos and "Spanish Johnny," a musician modeled on a guitar player from Veracruz named Julio whom Cather met in Colorado in 1912. A letter to Sergeant from May 21 of that year describes him as "the handsome one who sings ; from Vera Cruz ; knows such wonderful Mexican and Spanish songs" (*Letters* 157). Cather returns to elaborate on Julio's appearance at the end of this letter, comparing him to an Aztec sculpture, and speculates that in New York "He'd make an easy living as an artist's model. They'd fight for him. Pardon !" (*Letters* 159). A few weeks later Cather again tries to describe Julio, using more rhapsodic language to convey his beauty and claiming, "he is without beginning and without end." She writes, "I made a sort of translation of one of his songs which may give you some idea of his music, except that it is sultry and he is not at all sultry, anymore than lightning is" (*Letters* 162). She apologizes that her version of Julio's serenade can't fully convey the environment in which he performed (the stars and the "dead Indian cities on the mesa behind it"), and she expresses frustration at her "clumsy" English. In the presence of Julio, the usually articulate writer stumbles and loses her verbal fluency. Calling attention to the difference between live and transcribed performances, in these letters Cather proclaims the limits of language to record fully what Walter Benjamin famously termed the artist's "aura" : its uniqueness, its quality of being embedded in tradition, and its power in the "here and now."

10 In the novel's representation of similar experiences, dances and folk music in Moonstone's "Mexican Town" serve to express the vitality of traditions still evolving while providing the foundation for Thea's artistic sensibility. Cather creates a character from Julio, Johnny, who can write down any song but carries the real music with him, in his head and his body, and who easily improvises. For example, Johnny's serenade comes from Brazil or Venezuela, through Mexico ; he adapts a song from *Trovatore* by substituting a chorus of girls for the alto part. His music can't be fully committed to paper, and despite his voice's technical faults he exemplifies a true artist. On the night Thea sings and dances with him, "there was no constraint of any kind," just "a kind of natural harmony." When she and Johnny sing together, she also learns how to open herself to an active exchange with her audience and to incorporate their responses into her body :

> [T]his was the first time she had ever felt the response that such a people can give. They turned themselves and all they had over to her. For the moment they cared about nothing in the world but what she was doing. Their faces confronted her, open, eager, unprotected. She felt as if all these warm-blooded people debouched into her. Mrs. Tellamantez's fateful resignation, Johnny's madness, the adoration of the boy who lay still in the sand ; in an instant these things seemed to be within her instead of without, as if they had come from her in the first place. (258)

11 Their song carries as far as their friends the Kohler's house, where Fritz wakes to hear "Johnny's reedy tenor," "the bricklayer's big, opaque baritone," and Thea's "soprano voice, like a fountain jet, shot up into the light" (261). Together he and Mrs. Kohler, characterized as "the old people," marvel at the nimble quality of Thea's sound. "How it leaped from among those dusky male voices !" the narrator exclaims. "How it played in

and about and around and over them, like a goldfish darting among creek minnows, like a yellow butterfly soaring above a swarm of dark ones" (261). Through listening at the edges of the town's culturally defined spaces, transgressing the boundaries that separate its people, and imitating Julio's improvisatory freedom, Thea first achieves the fluid, energetic sound that will define her artistic identity. As her body and mind become repositories for these sounds, they take in the cultural knowledge they contain ; her mature art will translate these expressive qualities into her own voice.

12 To be sure, the narrator's classification of the town's German and Mexican immigrants as people with distinct musical sensibilities hinges on cultural and racial stereotypes : the Germans are linked to classical and high European culture, while the Mexicans are natural and "warm blooded." Such characterizations (especially read beside Cather's correspondence) remind us of the limits of the author's cultural relativism. To some extent her protagonist not only derives her artistic power from her recognition and incorporation of the differences between herself and her mentors ; she does so at the expense of recognizing their independent value. Another letter to Sergeant from August 14, 1912 qualifies Cather's initial response to both the "big and consuming" nature of the West and to Julio by stating that while the desert made her "quite tipsy" and Julio was "a wonder," together they were no substitute for "a whole civilization" (*Letters* 166). Cather continues by apologizing if such a statement seems "stupid" and "calculating" but nonetheless insists "there comes a moment when you must kiss [the desert] goodbye and go ! Go bleeding, but go, go, go !" (166), equating sober maturity with a recognition of the superiority of Western European civilization.

13 As the early parts of the novel narrate the ephemeral (and finally marginalized) musical influences in Thea's childhood and young adulthood, they reveal how cultural perspectives and the memories of other places and types of music shape vocal performance and sensory perception. For the European immigrants in Cather's fictional town who speak English with strong accents, music and languages from the Old World are "treasures of memory" that never quite reach listeners in the New World with the same intensity ; what is represented on the page is a fragment of more complete knowledge. Thea's first music teacher, Herr Wunsch, speaks German, quotes Ovid, and sings Orpheus's aria ; these are all sounds of the culture he has left behind physically, sounds that have become things now carried "in one's head, long after one's linen could be smuggled out in a tuning-bag" (30). Wunsch shares his music with his students in part to provide himself with the opportunity to sustain his own memories : through them, he can listen to the voices of his own faraway past. Even when Wunsch hears new music, as when "the sound of fiddles and guitars came across the ravine" in Mexican Town (32), he thinks back inwardly to his own youth, his travels, and his work, and then he projects into the future his hopes for his student.

> What was it she reminded him of ? A yellow flower, full of sunlight, perhaps. No ; a thin glass full of sweet-smelling, sparkling Moselle wine. He seemed to see such a glass before him in the arbor, to watch the bubbles rising and breaking, like the silent discharge of energy in the nerves and brain, the rapid florescence in young blood [. . .]. (33)

14 Here Wunsch, moving between past and present, old world and new, struggles for the comparison that will capture his mental associations in English. The words remain on the edge of speech, conveyed to the reader through the narrative representation of his stream of consciousness. As the daughter of Swedish immigrants, Thea also struggles at times to find the right words, but when she sings the problem of speaking in a single

language vanishes. Through representing the thoughts of Wunsch and Thea as incoherent fragments and analogies, Cather proposes that songs communicate in a universal language. Furthermore, her free indirect narration of music moves in and out of consciousness in order to prevent each utterance from becoming fixed and mechanical, emphasizing instead music's fluidity and instability. In describing the difference between a live performance and one captured by a phonograph, Jonathan Sterne describes a critical change in "the interiority of the performance" (Sterne 314) ; Cather's narration seeks to resist such distortion and preserve each performance's interiority.

15 Significantly, Cather locates her protagonist's direct meditations regarding the relations between language and music on the edges of her home territory ; as in her other novels, what we might call regional affect happens through a lived history of repetition and intensifies with displacement from and return to home. For example, when Thea returns to Moonstone on the Denver Express after her first winter studying in Chicago, she reflects, "There were so many words which she could not pronounce in speech as she had to do in singing" (242). Then, looking out the train window at the open country, she observes qualities of youthful energy and newness in the open land she now claims as her own, like the qualities that Stewart describes in her essay on regionality as an event that "strikes the senses" (Stewart 275) : "This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance," the narrator explains (*Song* 243). In this part of the novel, Thea returns not to an already-composed "region" but to a Western town whose boundaries extend to include "her own land." Just as to be "in place" in Stewart's small town north of Boston is "to pull yourself into alignment with something tentative, ephemeral, incidental though powerfully felt," (Stewart 276) to be "in place" in Moonstone as Cather describes it here is to feel the "kind of amiability and generosity" created by the absences of rocks and natural boundaries, to be pulled into a place where larks sing and the "blue air" vibrates "a new song" that is "intangible but powerful" (*Song* 243).

16 Readers of Cather's late novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) might recall Bishop Latour's similar account of the newness he continually perceived in a region adjacent to Moonstone, the high New Mexican desert. There he seemed to breathe "the air of new countries" whose particular qualities could only be sensed "on the bright edges of the world, on the great grass plains or the sage-brush desert" (*Death* 273). After years in this new world, Latour has come to find the desert air "necessary," containing something "soft and wild and free" (273). This critical passage in the later novel confirms Cather's aesthetic investment in composing regions through affective encounters between bodies, land, and air. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather insists on expressing a sense of place through recording "things that happen" at moments of first and repeated contact with a place, even if these moments are as ephemeral as a live performance and fail to cohere into linear temporality or sequential narrative. For example, the "intangible but powerful" sense of the land around Moonstone takes "Thea's mind back to Ray Kennedy," the railroad brakeman whose "death was the original germ of the story" (*Letters* 199), because she knew he believed that "all the Southwest really belonged to him because he had knocked about over it so much, and knew it, as he said, 'like the blisters on his own hands'" (244). It was "hard to tell about" this knowledge, so the narrator records it through singular scenes, internal

monologues, remembered conversations, metaphors of physical sensation, and musical analogies.

17 It is Thea's own sense of regional belonging, confirmed when she encounters the ancient rocks and stream in Panther Canyon in Part 4, "The Ancient People," that finally produces an epiphanic understanding of her responsibility as an artist. This section of the novel intensifies the dislocations that bring regional affects into provisional alignment and amplifies the pauses and silences that make the origins of all music audible. It begins by recording the narrator's feelings about the pine forests in Navajo territory beneath San Francisco Mountain : "Each tree grows alone, murmurs alone, thinks alone" (325). The narrator speculates on the similarity between the "inexorable reserve" of the forests, the pride and independence she claims characterizes Navajo people, and the perceived impersonality of Navajo language. Then she asserts, "That was the first thing Thea Kronborg felt about the forest, as she drove through it one May morning" (325). While this characterization of Navajo land seems excessively personified and its assessment of language without any factual basis, this experience of first contact serves to motivate Thea's release from grinding habits and fake personalities and prepares her to reconstruct her senses, her identity, and her voice. From this point on, "The Ancient Ones" shifts mainly to Thea's point of view and narrates her transformation. Readers follow her feelings of being "lost in the thrilling blue of the new sky and the song of the thin wind in the *piñons*. The old, fretted lines which marked one off, which defined her . . . were all erased" (326). They perceive the qualities of the land through Thea's physical contact with it, such as with the "yellow rocks baking in sunlight" (332) ; the serpentine river at the bottom of the canyon full of false endings ; the soaring of swallows in "the blue air-river" (331) ; and, above all, the feeling of sadness "like the aromatic smell which the dwarf cedars gave out in the sun," a feeling also compared to "a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally" (332).

18 The ancient history Thea senses in the atmosphere and encounters physically through inhabiting the cliff dwellings and handling fragments of pottery first takes auditory form as a voice speaking the same truths over and over, without an audience. The understanding of the ancient people she claims to receive here is also communicated through feelings likened to crude sounds, "simple, insistent, and monotonous, like the beating of Indian drums," not through words or song ; these feelings seemed "to translate themselves into attitudes of body, into degrees of muscular tension or relaxation" (333). Both analogies assert the truth of Thea's historical and regional knowledge while dramatically limiting her voice's expressive power. It's only when Thea listens to the movement of the stream at the bottom of the canyon that her claim to knowledge of the "continuity of life" begins to take more active form, as the current suggests "a kind of lightly worn, loosely knit personality" (334). At this moment, her understanding of art comes to her in a flash : "what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself ?" (335). With this intuitive understanding of deep local history and a clarified vision of art's function, Thea begins to construct a new vocal language from the sounds and sensations of the canyon and from the songs and musical phrases running through her mind.

Metropolitan audiences and western listeners

19 If we now return to the novel's concluding representation of Thea's triumphant performance of *Sieglund*, we see how it affirms the heroine's ability to express "[a]ll that deep-rooted vitality" she had been cultivating in Moonstone and, critically, in Panther Canyon, while testing her final commitment to high musical culture. This scene also specifies the few listeners Thea judges most capable of appreciating her art : her former teacher, Harsanyi ; her friend and patron, Doctor Archie ; her lover, Fred Ottenburg ; and, finally, "a grey-haired little Mexican, withered and bright as a string of peppers beside an 'dobe door" (526) : "Spanish Johnny," now made into a picturesque caricature. Johnny, too, had come to New York to perform, but unlike Thea he could not expect a discerning audience. His "Mexican band was to be a feature of Barnum and Bailey's circus that year. One of the managers of the show had travelled about the Southwest, signing up a lot of Mexican musicians at low wages" (526). Johnny, with his mandolin, would not attract the sympathetic affirmation of friends or the "savage," fierce greeting of the Met crowd, nor does the novel's plot allow him to meet Thea again face to face ; she doesn't seem to see him when she emerges from her dressing room, faced veiled and gaze cast down, although the narrator insists, twice, that "she would have known him" (527). And yet, Johnny is the one listener who would have "answered" Thea, the narrator tells us in the novel's last lines. His unseen smile, which "embraced all the stream of life that passed him" in response to her performance, is "the only commensurate answer" to her question about what "the good of it all" was. While this near meeting confirms the power of Thea's performance to communicate across great cultural and class divides, it also suggests that even here personal connections and memories strongly shape a listener's perception.

20 The cultural marketplaces in which Johnny and Thea perform—European and American opera houses and circus tents, respectively—similarly assess the value of voices and performers, seeking novelty and rewarding performers according to their ability to communicate to their audience and sell more tickets. Differences in style and ability are by no means relative, accounted for by cultural difference, as Thea has learned well. For Thea and perhaps for Cather, true artistry remains consistent, while popularity and perception of an artist's value depend on the whims of an audience that is not a cohesive community but an assemblage of paying listeners. As this concluding scene juxtaposes cultures, classes, tastes, and geographical affiliations within the urban spaces that would be familiar to Cather's readers while reminding us of the vibrant community of Moonstone from earlier days, it reveals the ways that modernity reorganizes culture spatially, with high and mass cultural production centered in the world's metropolises and folk artists pushed to the margins, only given public voice as racial or ethnic types and entertainers. It also specifies how cultural markets distinguish between lasting and ephemeral voices. Some music will be protected (performed in enclosed halls and recorded for posterity) and some music will be discarded (dissipated after being played in public, left to individual memories).

21 The emerging recording industry would intensify and reconfigure such divides, as Sterne's study explains. Recordings allowed selected pieces to be preserved and repeated at the listener's leisure, thus lessening the value of a single live performance while fueling listeners' appetites for new performers. While contemporary writers might have considered sound recording as "an archival medium," both the limits of

technology to produce an exact record and the effects of this technology on the marketplace and popular taste resulted in a new cultural emphasis on ephemerality. Thea's anxiety about the reception of her performance speaks directly to concerns about how such changes in technology would effect the market for high art and indirectly to the problems of managing time and preserving cultural and regional difference. In relation to this last point, consider the similarity between Cather's posing of the problem in *The Song of the Lark* and Franz Boas's expression of it in the paper "On Alternating Sounds," published in 1889. Boas explains the phenomenon of "sound-blindness" that had recently come under scientific scrutiny as the "inability to perceive the essential peculiarities of certain sounds." After exploring possible reasons for a listener's inability to hear certain sounds, he proposes that the capacity to process sound depends on listener's auditory history : the hearer "perceives the sound. . . [o]nly by means of similar sounds he has heard before" (48). Further, he argues that the ability to discern similarity is contingent on the interval of time between first and current hearing : if the listener waits too long, the second sounding will seem different than the first, perhaps because other sensory experience in that interval interferes with perception. Using evidence drawn from phonetic experiments, Boas continues to refute the notion that some listeners lack the ability to hear differences in sound. Resisting current anthropological theories specifying that languages and cultures evolved from more primitive to more complex forms, he concludes "that there is no such phenomenon as synthetic or alternating sounds, and that their occurrence is in no way a sign of primitiveness of the speech in which they are said to occur ; that alternating sounds are in reality alternating apperceptions of one and the same sound" (52).

22 As he focused on the problem of perception—and on the role that the cultural background or bias of the listener could play in classifying sound—Boas arrived at a new way to think about variation and difference without judging the value of sounds in relation to one another.[3] Although this conclusion "is today more or less a commonplace," Eric Sundquist points out that Boas's argument nonetheless serves "as a general paradigm for the relationship of two conflicting yet coalescing cultural traditions" and "an apt way to characterize the shortcomings in our understanding of what constitutes American literature" (6-7). Through his engagement with Boas throughout his study *To Wake the Nations*, Sundquist raises questions that help us to see how Cather's novel records a range of the voices and cultural traditions that coexisted in her Western past (and coalesced in her fictional Moonstone) while also advocating for an ideal of a singular and universal art. Rather than reconcile these contradictory ambitions, the novel alternates between parts that record cultural difference and parts that either assimilate such difference within a single, privileged character's consciousness or assert new hierarchies through imagining how difference could be preserved. In its engagement with the conditions of contemporary performance and its projection of the aesthetic and social implications of sound recordings, *The Song of the Lark* also poses the broader challenges that Western writers confronted as they tried to develop narrative forms that incorporated the lived experience of regionality. In the commercial field of literary production, would popular taste for "regional" fiction prevail over more improvisatory explorations of what it meant to live in place ? Under the conditions of an increasingly technological modernity, whose performances and traditions would survive ?

The American West, in replay

23 The epilogue to *The Song of the Lark*, set in "Moonstone again, in the year 1909," seeks to answer questions about what constituted Western American identity in the early twentieth century as it proposes another perspective on the "right" audience for the heroine's art. Cather seemed to require great distance from her place of origin, contact with other cultures and places, and the passage of time before she could combine the elements of her past into the narrative form that fulfilled her strivings as writer ; similarly, the novel concludes only after a significant temporal break and shift in point of view. The ending, which moves from New York City to Moonstone and suddenly aligns its sympathies with Thea's provincial aunt Tillie, heightens the reader's awareness of the novel's fragmented structure and narrative instability. While often in *The Song of the Lark* Cather seems to express her own beliefs (evident throughout her published reviews and letters) through either her protagonist or her narrator, the Epilogue seems to fulfill Cather's original intention for the novel : namely, to keep the reader's sympathy in line with the residents of the small western town and to judge the value of art in terms of its ability to communicate to any listener with open ears. While Cather's protagonist comes to insist on a single ideal that must be expressed in every performance and her narrator confirms the value of the successful singer's personal sacrifices, the final lines of the novel prior to the epilogue depart from these two aligned views, claiming that such a break is necessary because artist's complete growth "can scarcely be followed in a personal narrative" (527). The narrator claims, finally, that the story could only address "the simple and concrete beginnings" of a Moonstone girl's life and raise the hope that its account of loyalty to an "exalted ideal" would, "in *some* of us, rekindle generous emotions" (528 ; emphasis added). The audience for the novel, too, would be select, and the success of the story, like the success of its heroine's performance, would be measured through its ability to "rekindle" feelings that were already present before.

24 As the epilogue replays Thea's performance in stories, memories, and recordings, it keeps measuring her voice's variations, its endurance, and its affective power. This return to Moonstone confirms Cather's stated intention to keep "within the range of the Moonstone comprehension" (*Letters* 212). Yet we should also note that this final return to Moonstone occurs on a different emotional register – detached yet sentimental, as if showing us how tones of voice weaken over long distances and in the transfer to recorded disks. It is the old Moonstone in replay. Whereas the land Thea first encountered when she returned to Moonstone had the qualities of desert light and fresh soil, now it has aged : the sand hills have shrunk, the grass thickened. The wind "plays a milder tune" (531). The only survivor close to the heroine is Aunt Tillie, left to her wandering fancies and her "little magic world, full of secret satisfactions"— primarily, the repetition of "the legend of Kronborg, the artist," the memory of hearing her niece perform *Lohengrin*, and the mechanical satisfaction of listening to Thea's voice again on her new phonograph. The phonograph provides her with "evidence" of Thea's greatness "in hair lines on metal disks" (536). Whatever doubts she might have about whether her stories about her niece stretched the truth, the recordings seemed to set to rest : "Oh, the comfort, to a soul too zealous, of having at last a rose so red it could not be further painted, a lily so truly auriferous that no amount of gilding could exceed the fact !" (536), the narrator explains. Tillie's response to Thea's recorded

music, though limited by her memories, her provincialism, and the artificial perfection of the recordings, affirms the fact of her niece's achievement.

25 And yet, the great "fact" preserved by the phonograph seems to contradict Thea's belief in the essential vitality of art and Cather's knowledge of the distortions produced in early operatic recordings. In Fremstad's career, recordings fell far short of perfection. While the singer agreed to make recordings for Columbia Records (fifteen between 1911 and 1912), she found the quality of sound severely lacking and refused to make more, even when recording techniques improved (*Song*, Explanatory Notes 788). We also know from Cather's 1929 letter on the topic of traveling theatrical companies that Cather, perhaps influenced by Fremstad's view, came to distrust recordings and films and doubted them to be capable of producing the same effect as live performances. We might, then, be wary of Tillie's claim that the recording could convey anything close to the power of a live performance and be inclined to dismiss her perspective at the end of the novel as naïve and sentimental.

26 However, several letters reveal Cather's deep identification with Tillie and the importance she placed on Tillie's perception of Thea's voice. In writing to Sergeant on December 7, 1915, Cather expressed her delight that Fremstad found *The Song of the Lark* to be "the only book about an artist she'd ever read in which she felt that there was 'something doing in the artist'," as well as her regret at "the rather coarse necessity of crowding her out before the footlights" (*Letters* 212). She justified this choice by explaining that she wanted to show the reach of Thea's success by making her art comprehensible to people like Dr. Archie and Johnny, "the people interested in her." She wrote that she felt a responsibility "to give her the kind of success that even Tillie could understand," and for that reason she "kept within the range of Moonstone comprehension, and gave them a triumph that they could get their hands on" (212). Her letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher from March 15, 1916 confirms that the book was "all really done from the Moonstone point of view" and "really written in the speech of Moonstone" (218). She elaborates,

> The book is done in two manners – one intimate, one remote. [Thea] goes on, but I stand still in Moonstone with Tillie, and I write from Moonstone. That change in presentation was in the very germ of the idea, and my doubt as to whether it would be convincing kept me back from writing the book for several years. (218)

27 While the singer's later experiences were equally "real," they were less "personal," in Cather's view, so she shifted her narrative attention away from the artist's formation to her audience's appreciation of the artist's achievement. "The last chapters were written not so much for Thea as for Moonstone and Dr. Archie" because Cather believed Thea "had to make good to them" (218).

28 Although Cather's revisions for the novel's much later edition in 1937 included omitting some of the material details of Tillie's memories in the epilogue (including her scrapbook and the mention of the phonographic "evidence in hair lines on metal disks"), revealing in part "her desire, as a mature and successful writer, to move away from being seen as too dependent on sources and specific prototypes" (Moseley 596), the emotional satisfaction produced by replaying Thea's voice through Tillie's ears concludes both versions of the novel. Even as it predicts the distortion of reality and of memory over time that contradicts the relative permanence of the sound recording, the novel finally aligns the reader with Tillie's memory and her comforting ritual. The epilogue does not fully resolve the tension between the taste exercised by metropolitan

publics (the urban audiences that gather to listen to live performances) and the feelings registered in western listeners (individuals like Tillie who listen privately to recordings being played and replayed). Nor does it fully endorse the value of the sound recording. It demonstrates, however, that because the recording can be repeated over time, in an intimate manner, it can communicate the power of high art to ordinary listeners in a way that a live performance might not.

29 If we consider all the parts of the novel, it becomes evident that *The Song of the Lark* asserts its value as an acoustic archive, a textual space for sound preservation. Like other novels from this stage of Cather's career, *The Song of the Lark* provides a rich repertoire of immigrant speech, folk music, and natural sounds, and it explores how the process of sensing space occurs at the edges of habitation and can be internalized, transformed into music, and conveyed across cultural and regional boundaries. Such a narrative effort to assemble and negotiate differences through sounds and their perception was shared by other regional writers in the modernist period. For example, as Thadious Davis writes about southern literature, the inclusion of African American folk music and its modern variations became a central feature of African American modernist literature, and it promoted the declaration of new kinds of racial identity : "the song – the spiritual, the blues, the gospel, the jazz vocalizations and mechanical reproductions in recordings – also become the technology of the heard [. . .]. All of these become self-images, markers of cultural engagement and, importantly, spaces of preservation" (59-60).

30 The challenge to keep the archive alive remained, however, for Cather and for other regional writers. As I have argued throughout this essay, *The Song of the Lark* struggles especially hard to enact a vision of the novel as a form composed from a variety of sounds and regional feelings and brought to life by the individual artist. While deeply rooted in Western American places and communities, the artistic ideal it promotes also claims deep connections to the European traditions of high art ; while circulating in urban markets for cosmopolitan audiences, it also resists simplification into a single perspective. Sterne proposes that sound recording accentuated modernity's contradictory senses of time (308) ; in Cather's novel, modernity's contradictory senses of time *and* place barely hold together. In *Beautiful Circuits*, his study of modernity and technology, Mark Goble proposes another conception of modernity : the condition of perpetual detachment or alienation from a past that persists only in archival forms, premised on the belief that the past could be "rescued by the technologies of modern life, and that nothing of its texture will be lost in the translation" (230). From this perspective, Cather's representation of technology, her concern about the novel's reception, and her shifting attitudes towards her work actively resists technological modernity. Instead of looking to sound technology to "rescue" the past or preserve marginalized cultures, *The Song of the Lark* proposes sound recording to function as a supplement to memory.

31 When the novel was first published, Cather was very pleased with the review in *Life* magazine that identified the effect of the text as producing an "indescribable thrill which Stevenson has called the tuning fork of art" (Moseley 589). Other reviewers observed that this work "strikes even deeper" than *O Pioneers !* (Moseley 590), supporting the author's belief in the value of her conception. Over time, the novel remained popular but Cather's own view of it became more critical. She continued to recall her enjoyment at writing it, but, by 1930, she developed an "increasingly

negative attitude" about the novel and about her own presence in stories about the West. She had written to her editor Ferris Greenslet on March 28, 1915, "Unless you had lived all over the West, I don't believe you could possibly know how much of the West this story has in it" (*Letters 199*). The revisions she made for the 1937 Autograph edition involved more deletions and other changes than for any of her other works ; while she wanted to keep its texture (the sensations that the text's details, sources, and plot could produce), she no longer wanted to write in such detail, with such thinly veiled sources, or with such overt depictions of romance. She altered the text to fit her own changing notions of what it should be, to satisfy a new generation of readers, and to mark her own shifting relation to the West. She wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher on June 22, 1933,

> My chief happiness (probably yours, too) is in forgetting the past as if it had never been. No, I don't mean 'the past', but myself in the past. As soon as I think of myself as a human figure in that past, in those scenes (Red Cloud, Colorado, New Mexico) the scenes grow rather dim and are spoiled for me. When I remember those places I am not there at all, as a person. I seem to have been a bundle of enthusiasms and physical sensations, but not a person. Maybe everyone is like that. How can anyone really see himself ? He can see a kind of shadow he throws, but not the real creature. (*Letters* 487)

32 Nearly twenty after novel's first writing, with her own experience relegated to memory and with the popular views and nostalgic sounds of the West just emerging in film, Cather doubted whether she could distinguish her "real" self from its "shadow." Perhaps she no longer heard the sounds she remembered in the same way, or perhaps she couldn't sustain in her mind the tentative and ephemeral feelings about Western places that eluded capture in written language. She could only hope that the novel could continue function as a phonograph, ready to play the alternating sounds that defined the regional encounters already past, in the way she had described to Greenslet in 1915 : "When I am old and can't run about the desert anymore, it will always be here in this book for me ; I'll only have to lift the lid" (*Letters* 199).

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NOTES

1. Similarly, ethnographer Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes gaps as spaces that "develop in the seams of universal projects ; they are found where universals have not been successful in setting all the terms" (202). Susan Kollin usefully engages Tsing's notion of "friction" to describe the dynamic of contact in regional spaces in the wake of globalization, emphasizing the awkward, unstable, and unequal nature of such encounters. See Kollin, "The Global West," and Tsing, *Friction*.

2. For a fascinating discussion of how recordings made by early audio ethnographers were "artifacts of this strange mix" of nostalgia, belief in cultural pluralism, foreboding, and a preservationist ethos, see Sterne 309-315.
3. For anthropologists, Boas's claim could be seen as "foreshadowing much of his later critique of evolutionism," since here "Boas implied that from any given linguistic vantage point, any other language could be considered primitive" (Bunzl, qtd. in Boon 20)

ABSTRACTS

This essay argues that Willa's Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915) approaches the novel as an acoustic archive, a textual space for sound preservation. While the novel proves the author's early and sustained interest in recording the American West's diverse cultures and socially marginalized groups, it also proclaims the value of high art and live performance. By exploring the contradictory feelings and desires that music evokes in different listeners and then narrating the difficulty of capturing them in a fixed narrative, *The Song of the Lark* reveals the cultural and temporal instability of Western identity and regional writing in the modernist period.

Cet article montre comment Willa Cather, dans Song of the Lark (1915), traite le roman comme une archive acoustique, un espace textuel pour la conservation des sons. Alors que son roman prouve depuis le début le souci constant de la romancière de décrire les cultures diverses et les groupes marginalisés de l'Ouest américain, il célèbre également la valeur du grand art et des spectacles. En explorant les sentiments et les désirs contradictoires que la musique suscite chez différentes personnes et en relatant ensuite les difficultés pour les saisir dans un récit figé, The Song of the Lark révèle l'instabilité culturelle et temporelle de l'identité et de l'écriture régionale de l'Ouest dans la période moderne.

INDEX

Keywords: alternating sounds, preservationist ethos, archive, regionality, sound recordings, The Song of the Lark, American West
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